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Everything a Working Mother Needs to Know

Anne Weisberg

Carol Buckler

New York Law School, carol.buckler@nyls.edu

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EVERYTHING A WORKING MOTHER NEEDS TO KNOW

*about pregnancy rights,
maternity leave,
and making
her career work for her*

ANNE C. WEISBERG
and
CAROL A. BUCKLER



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First Edition

To my mother

ACW

To Rob, Sarah, and Sam

CAB

research assistants: Rhonda Cooper, James Gillespie, Grace Hackmeier, Elizabeth Haussler, and Elissa Kaplan. To them, we owe a big thanks. Without them, the book would not have been as thorough as it is. Any mistakes or misinterpretations of the research material, however, are solely our responsibility. We also thank Arthur D. Buckler for sharing his professional insights and expertise with us.

Finally, we owe special thanks to the law firm where we met. The firm was always supportive of us, even as it struggled to respond to our needs as working mothers. We are grateful to everyone at the firm for making that effort. Their willingness to explore new arrangements sets an example that we hope others will follow.

ACW and CAB

My personal thanks go first to my husband, Don, for encouraging me to follow my dream. My thanks go second to my children, Sarah, Matthew, and Rachel, for the lessons they teach me and the joy they give me every day. They are my inspiration.

I dedicate this book to my mother who, as a wonderful mother and distinguished architect, provided me with an unsurpassable role model for all of life.

ACW

First, I thank my parents, M. L. Buckler and Joan Buckler, who have always encouraged me to believe in myself. I also thank my husband, Robert Muffly, on whom I count for both clear-eyed realism and loving support, and for a laugh when I most need it. Finally, I thank my children, Sarah and Sam, for the questions they ask and the love we share.

CAB

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INTRODUCTION

How This Book Came to Be

When Anne got out of law school, she was already four months' pregnant. People gave her a good-natured warning: "You don't know what you're in for: Having children is going to change your life." Anne would think about how having children might affect her personal life, her marriage, her sense of self. But she didn't think about how having children would impact another important dimension of her life: her work. She assumed that if she worked hard and well, she would be treated as anyone else would be who did the same. It never occurred to her that having children would affect significantly how colleagues perceived her or judged her potential. Two children and five years of professional work later, Anne wished someone had prepared her for being a mother in the workplace.

Carol didn't get pregnant until she had been working as a lawyer for three years. She had had plenty of time to ponder the effect of children on her career, but she did not have plenty of answers, or even people whom she could ask.

The two of us met as colleagues at a small environmental law firm in New York City. Anne started working at the firm while Carol was on her first maternity leave. Other lawyers told Carol, "You're really going to like Anne; she has a baby, too." Fortunately, we did become friends, developing a bond as the only lawyers at the firm who were also mothers. We didn't simply supply each other with information about pediatricians or child

care. Equally important in our friendship was sharing the daily challenges of combining work* and family without worrying about sending the wrong message. Anne could talk with Carol about having to be in court while her daughter was home with a bad flu; Carol could tell Anne about scheduling a client meeting around the nursery school teacher's conference.

As more and more of our friends and colleagues became pregnant, they would come to us asking for information on maternity leave policies, or seeking support for the decision to go back to work. We realized that working mothers needed a book that dealt with their experience in the workplace.

Why This Book

There are countless books on how to take care of our minds and bodies during pregnancy, how to prepare for labor and delivery, and how to nurture our children. Surprisingly few books help us understand and cope with the workplace once we have children.

Being a working mother raises a host of issues on many different fronts: home, work, play. In *Everything a Working Mother Needs to Know . . .** we focus primarily on how to deal with the "working" part of being a working mother: Will your experience change when you are no longer just a *woman* in the workplace but also a *mother* in the workplace? How are you treated at work? How do you treat your work? How much maternity leave should you ask for? What kind of child care should you seek? How can we all make the workplace better for working mothers? When work-related issues such as child care spill over onto the home front, we discuss these issues as well.

We start the book by discussing in Chapter 1 the way mothers are perceived at work, because these perceptions color our experiences at every stage: from being pregnant at work to being back on the job after one or more maternity leaves. Images of working mothers as not committed to their careers, or better

suited to being home, or grasping for more than they deserve, often form the basis for how their work is evaluated. Seeing through these images is the first step in taking control of your experience as a working mother.

With an understanding of the experiences of other working mothers, as well as the legal and financial realities of combining work and motherhood, you'll be better prepared for being a working mother. Knowing the facts and the array of available options will help you make more informed and, we hope, more satisfying choices as a mother in the workplace.

We talked with a number of women in a variety of careers—teachers, scientists, doctors, lawyers, managers, secretaries—to give you a sense of how it *feels* to be a working mother: the anxieties, the special rewards, the relationships with co-workers. We talked to Debbie Reed, a high school teacher, about the importance of her caregiver in her life. Susan Eilertsen, a principal in a public relations firm, told us about how she feels as the primary breadwinner in her family. We interviewed Tina Bailey, a chemistry professor who has adopted four children, now ages twenty-one to fourteen, about how attitudes toward adoption and working mothers have changed over the last twenty years. Elizabeth Cheng Krist described to us what happened when she and a colleague approached their boss about job-sharing a position as photography editor at a major business magazine. Diana Manning, a real estate executive, told us about the panic she sometimes feels over managing her children's schedule as well as her job. Their stories, and the many others in the book, will show you that successfully integrating work and family is partly a state of mind.

From Working Woman to Working Mother

As a professional working woman, chances are your work environment is male-dominated, or at least most of your supervisors are male. Many professions, such as law, medicine, and business, are still predominantly male. Even in traditionally female professions, such as teaching and nursing, the people in charge—school administrators and doctors—are often male. As a result, you are accustomed to and may have even adopted many of the behaviors and aspirations of your male colleagues. While you may be aware

*Throughout this book, we use the term "work" as a shorthand for "work that you get paid to do" in order to be consistent with current terminology. We recognize that this terminology unfortunately results in devaluing if not ignoring the work that mothers do at home—the work of caring for children and maintaining a household. We have not as yet come up with a solution to this language problem. Suffice it to say that it is an indication of our society's conflicting views on the whole topic of motherhood—revered on the one hand, belittled on the other.

that being female sets you apart in certain ways, generally you do not consider yourself any different from the other people in the office, male or female.

Chances are also that you have decided to have a child only after working for some time. An increasing number of women are having their first child in their early thirties. If you are around thirty during your first pregnancy, you have spent five to ten years developing your career. You probably feel deeply committed to your work and see it as an important source of your identity and independence. Your work also affects your life outside work. Even if you met your husband before you began your career, it's likely that your work (as well as his) has shaped your relationship. As a vice president in banking says, "My husband fell in love with me when I was working; I don't know how he would think of me if I didn't work." In other words, work is central to your life and to your self-esteem.

Once you become a mother, things change—at work, at home, and within yourself. Not only do you have more to do, but you realize a complicated transformation taking place, rooted in societal as well as very personal notions of success.

Many women feel alone in their new struggle, as if they were the first ever to balance work and family. Part of their isolation comes from a lack of programs and policies that address mothers in the workplace. Yet, the better informed working mothers are, the better they can answer their own questions. To this end, we explore topics ranging from your legal rights when pregnant, to various maternity leave options, to the factors to consider in designing an alternative work schedule.

We address ourselves primarily to women because research and our experience have shown that balancing work and family falls primarily on the mother. Women more than men feel torn between the demands of work and family. Women bear the family responsibilities disproportionately, even if they are working outside the home. While we must acknowledge this disparity, we do not condone it. The status quo should be changed, and remedying this inequity will begin, in large part, with working mothers. As working mothers shoulder the burden of the status quo, they see most clearly its limitations and the possibilities of a new reality.

While society—and many women—view work and family as completely separate, the reality is quite different. Work and family are interconnected. Every working mother spends every

day balancing the responsibilities, joys, and accomplishments of work *and* family. Yet, no one can give you a formula for success. Each working mother must find her own set of solutions; these solutions (and indeed definitions of the "problem" and "success") change over time. This book will help you discover your own answers. While it cannot (nor should it) replace conversations with other working mothers, it fills in the gaps in those conversations, and offers a starting point for women who do not yet have other working mothers they can call.

The Superwoman Myth

Working mothers must often fight to prove that they belong in the workplace and are entitled to the same employment opportunities as men. The number of working mothers continues to grow, but the workplace is moving glacially to accommodate them. All too often working mothers are confronted with resentment rather than reinforcement. The laws protecting pregnant workers and working parents are weak at best, and the vast majority of employers offer pathetic maternity leave and child care policies.

Employers may assume that they don't need to support working mothers because they get help from their husbands; this is a fantasy. Research has shown that husbands of working mothers do not share equally the responsibilities of child rearing. Equally troubling is that working mothers also do the lion's share of household tasks. Working mothers shoulder almost all the responsibility for laundry, cooking, cleaning, and other household chores. A 1987 Boston University survey concluded that men with working wives spend almost exactly the same amount of time on household chores as men whose wives do not work outside the home (about twelve hours per week¹).

In other words, husbands act as if they have traditional wives at home even if they don't. Clearly, many husbands and employers are engaged in upholding the same fantasy: It's called "Superwoman." Superwoman can work full-time, care for the children, cook all the meals, do all the cleaning and laundry, and still have a smile on her face at the end of the day. She does not exist.

The Superwoman myth benefits everyone but working mothers, so we must ultimately be the ones to expose the myth, both

at home and at work. Unfortunately, because we fear we will lose status and respect in the workplace when we become mothers, many of us try to hide—rather than expose—conflict between work and family. This creates a vicious cycle that Felice Schwartz, an expert on women's status in the workplace, calls the “conspiracy of silence.”

Dana Friedman, a longtime proponent of work/family benefits, tells of a senior vice president at a Fortune 500 company who went to drop off her child at the baby-sitter's, only to find no one there. She managed to find another sitter for that day, but she was two hours late for work. What did she tell her boss? That she had a flat tire.

Why did she feel that having a flat tire would be a more acceptable excuse than a care-giver mix-up? Perhaps because *anyone*, including her boss, could have a flat tire; it's just “one of those things.” Having a problem with a care-giver, however, sets her apart as a woman who has chosen to have a child. Her problem is perceived as an outgrowth of that personal choice; it's not yet accepted as one of those things that could happen to anyone. So she hid the truth to protect her image in the eyes of her boss.

Avoidance never leads to solutions; to break this vicious cycle working mothers must start raising the consciousness of the workplace. Breaking the silence is tricky (you may feel that your job is on the line, and it may well be) but in the long run we must either risk it or accept the Superwoman myth, with the exhaustion and guilt that go with it.

While tackling the workplace sounds like—and often is—a daunting proposition, we're in a better position to do so now than ever before. Our sheer numbers give us tremendous leverage. For many employers the choice is between providing benefits to working mothers or losing these employees, only to hire other young women who will soon present them with the same choices. The time will come soon when companies will need to have such policies in order to attract the most talented workers—male and female.

Change comes slowly. But remember that every time an employer and employee work out an arrangement that satisfies them both, progress is achieved, especially if the experience is shared with others in similar positions.



1

MOTHERS IN THE WORKPLACE

An Unusual Sight, a Beautiful Picture

Carol Barrett was director of planning for the City of Annapolis, Maryland, when she was pregnant with her second child and her son Craig was a toddler. She had to attend many evening meetings, so she had a complicated child care plan. Sometimes, however, her regular arrangements, and even her backup, fell through. One night she had no choice but to take Craig with her to a meeting of the zoning board. Her memory of that evening is still vivid ten years later:

I left Craig in the back of the room properly armed with crayons and paper. Except he figured that the action was in the front of the room. So, all by himself, he came and sat at the table with the applicant and his attorney. You have to understand, this was a quasi-judicial setting, with the applicant and his lawyer sitting before the board.

Everyone waited for me to do something. What was I going to do? I just kept on going. Like most circumstances when well-meaning people are confronted with something new for the first time, they take their cues from other people. I didn't act as if it were a terrible problem or a big deal. Although initially the attorneys moved their chairs over as if this kid were going to do a scene from *The Exorcist* and vomit green stuff all over them, it dawned on them after a couple of minutes that this was actually